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## FEMA Flip-Flops Again on Trailers

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Those trailers the Federal Emergency Management Agency bought to house Hurricane Katrina victims were at the center of the storm again yesterday -- and not in a way that's going to make folks at the beleaguered agency any happier.

[FEMA](#) hurriedly bought the 145,000 trailers and mobile homes via no-bid contracts just before and after Katrina hit the coast in August 2005. But the purchase quickly became problematic, with some communities refusing them for a variety of reasons.

FEMA was forced to put trailers on the market, selling them to anyone for 40 cents on the dollar.

Yesterday, however, the emergency agency offered to buy them back, for their original purchase price, because of concerns that the trailers are tainted with formaldehyde. The agency said it is making the offer because of concerns about "possible adverse health effects" associated with the trailers.

More than 10,800 trailers were sold to the public by the [General Services Administration](#) from July 2006 until the program was suspended in July 2007, FEMA officials said. All of the trailers bought directly from the GSA will be eligible for the full buybacks, although purchasers will be responsible for getting the trailers back to FEMA drop-off points.

The issue of formaldehyde in the trailers has been contentious since early in the shelter program. A common wood preservative used in construction materials, it can cause vision and respiratory problems, and long-term exposure has been linked to cancer, asthma, bronchitis and allergies in children.

Although the federal government sets acceptable workplace exposure limits for formaldehyde -- and FEMA has told employees not to enter unused trailers sitting in the sunshine -- there are no standards for the recreational vehicle industry. People housed in the trailers were told to ventilate them well, but the agency later acknowledged that it was slow in responding to the formaldehyde concerns.

In 2006, the [Sierra Club](#) reported finding unsafe levels of formaldehyde in 30 of 32 trailers it tested along the Gulf Coast, and some residents filed a class-action lawsuit last year in federal court in [Baton Rouge](#) against trailer manufacturers.

FEMA spokesman James McIntyre said yesterday that the agency has not made any formal determination about the possible harm caused by formaldehyde while it awaits a report from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) on the issue. The report is due this month.

McIntyre said that more than 40,000 trailers are still being used as emergency shelters along the Gulf Coast. He said, however, the agency "has an aggressive policy to de-populate the units" -- placing residents in hotels and motels, or in more permanent local housing.

McIntyre said he does not know the possible cost to the government of the trailer buyback. Last year, however, the agency said an average trailer cost \$18,600 and that the government was getting about 40

cents on the dollar for the vehicles it was selling. The spokesman also said it is unclear what will happen to the returned trailers.

Thousands of unused trailers remain in storage at airfields, industrial parks and warehouses.

According to yesterday's FEMA release, anyone who bought a trailer through the GSA or FEMA will have 60 days to request a refund. In addition to the 10,839 sold through online auctions, McIntyre said that an additional 864 trailers were purchased by evacuees directly from FEMA.

The agency also has offered to repurchase trailers bought by evacuees last year, but yesterday's announcement was the first regarding the many more sold through auction by the GSA. As the trailer problems grew last year, agency Director R. David Paulison banned any future purchases for emergency shelter.

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